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# L' UMILE PIANTA.

FOR THE CHILDREN'S SAKE.

## ART TRAINING IN THE NURSERY.

BY "AUNT MAI."

(Concluded.)

WE owe much to Millais, Caldicott, Kate Greenaway, Walter Crane and other labourers in this field. Few things do more to foster art in the nursery than illustrations in books, provided that these are few and well chosen. The idiosyncrasy in all children that they prefer the small and minute, generally leads them to love their pictures in books even more than those on the walls. The reader is recommended to look at Walter Crane's *Fight between the Red Rose and the White Lily*, which is full of beautiful lines and grace, and a book, *Over the Hills*, illustrated by Harriett Bennett, which Mr. Collingwood, the Oxford Extension Lecturer, has recommended the Members of the Fesole Club to copy. I regret that every year there are published picture books for children which leave nothing more to desire from an artist's point of view; but when the literary critic turns to the letterpress it is found sadly wanting. I know many parents who will not permit these to enter the nursery, believing that if the taste is lowered by repetition of the stories told, it must inevitably lead to forming a voracious reader of third-rate three-volumed novels in later years. Scarcely any writer for children of the present day can forget the grown-up person, or remember what they really felt themselves when they were little. One writer of children's songs, however, is a notable exception—I refer to Robert Louis Stevenson. He remembers exactly what every one of us thought and did when we were in the nursery. If you try to throw your memory back to the days



of your childhood, do you not recollect that when you were taken a walk through a lovely country, with flowers near you and hills in the distance, and between, a river flowing silently along, and the lark overhead, and lambs bleating and running away from you?—it is not *these* things that made the greatest impression on you. You recall much more vividly the wonderful tale you made up to the accompaniment of the perambulator wheels at your side; how a giant lived on the other side of the river, and the lambs were going to be roasted for his supper, and you would ford the river with a shield and sword and rescue the victims, even if you got wounded in the affray. In that case you would become a hero, and possibly be crowned king by the people round about.

Children are not naturally enthusiastic over scenery. Their simple natures take the mountains and seas as a matter of course to be used as an *accompaniment* to their *imagination*. This is why Stevenson is such a children's friend. He has translated to many of them their own unconscious thoughts.

In the *Child's Garden of Verse* there is the following odd idea any child might easily have:—

"The friendly cow, so red and white,  
I love with all my heart;  
She gives me cream with all her might,  
To eat with apple tart."

Another is about a sick child whose fancies are always very busy:—

"When I was sick, and lay a-bed,  
I had two pillows at my head,  
And all my toys beside me lay  
To keep me happy all the day.  
  
"And sometimes for an hour or so  
I watched my leaden soldiers go,  
With different uniform and drills  
Among the bed-clothes, through the hills.  
  
"And sometimes sent my ships in fleets  
All up and down among the sheets,  
Or brought my trees and houses out  
And planted cities all about.  
  
"I was the giant great and still  
That sits upon the pillow hill,  
And sees before him dale and plain—  
The pleasant land of counterpane."

Just one verse describes graphically what a child looks forward to—

"When I am grown to man's estate  
I shall be very proud and great,  
And tell the other girls and boys  
Not to meddle with my toys."

It would not be fair to Mr. Stevenson to quote at length many of his songs, but for very tiny mites I must recommend—

"My bed is like a little boat—  
Nurse helps me in when I embark;  
She girds me in my sailor coat,  
And starts me in the dark."

And the following three verses.

Most little ones, if they looked upon their bed as a little boat, would be more delighted to embark than to step into the much disliked prosaic couch.

Some of these songs are set to very good music by Mary Carmichael, and published by Enoch & Sons for a shilling. Myers, in Bernum Street, sells them.

To all those who do not know the *Garden of Verse* I would say: Life has yet some pleasure in store for you.

No nursery is quite complete without Lear's *Book of Nonsense*, and the longer poems, *The Owl and the Pussy Cat*, etc. The drawings are such caricatures, they can do no harm, but they certainly tend to develop the humour of the children, which is so necessary for the success of the after life. Even babes of three laugh when they see the pictures, and you repeat to them—

"There was an old man with a beard  
Who said: 'It is just as I feared—  
Two owls and a hen, four larks and a wren,  
Have all made their nests in my beard.'"

Or,

"There was an old person of Cadiz  
Who was always polite to the ladies,  
But in handing his daughter he fell into the water,  
Which drowned that old person of Cadiz."

I am strongly of opinion that a child who has not been spoiled with poor literature has a keen delight in many of the poems of our great poets. But this is not a paper on literature, and the educated world knows of the artistic literary value of Shakespeare, Wordsworth, and Blake's



shorter poems. The poem that made the deepest impression on my childish mind was Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. I did not understand it, but it always fascinated me.

Before leaving the nursery, we must consider for one moment the influence of toys on their owners' minds. We would none of us dream of dressing our little daughter in a white tarletan skirt, decorated with gold and silver tinsel, and put a crimson hat and blue sash on, and send her to walk up Regent Street with the nurse, but yet we sometimes allow their dolls — *their* children, as it were — to be dressed in some very *outrageous* costume, and to allow their eyes to become accustomed to inartistic dress and bad art. One little girl, who had had such a monstrosity presented to her by her nurse, was much hurt when her aunt expressed her horror at the same. She was somewhat pacified when told that the colours were bad and did not go together, and a few days afterwards she was heard asking her grandmother if she would buy her a "setic" doll.

There is hardly any child whose first impulse is not to scribble on the wall, or on some scrap of paper. It is almost the first thing he wishes to do, and there is hardly a parent who has not scolded him for it. You can develop a child's faculties better by means of drawing than even by books, and no other study will so quicken his perceptions. It is now proved scientifically that the trained use of the hands leads to a strengthening of the brain power, and the sooner we as a nation grasp this truth, the more hopeful can we be about the next generation. The great point is: our children should be encouraged, but *not* flattered. With no help and encouragement, the child gradually loses his desire to draw, and gets more interested in other things, until the wish to draw again breaks out, and then double effort is required to recover what might have been gained insensibly. Most children see straight until they are spoilt by pernicious teaching. I have taught modelling to factory lads, and to public school boys; and in every case the boys who had never had sixpence spent on their education have surpassed the boys who have been learning for years. The mill boys looked at the object they were modelling, and so carefully grasped the relation of one line to another that they very seldom had to undo their work. This theory was borne out by the master of a large School of Art in one of our manufacturing towns. He said that his

experience was similar, and that in his evening classes the operatives' work was much more correct than that of his educated students. The last few months I have been teaching modelling and basket-making to a class of thirty boys in our National Schools, five and six years of age. A teacher of one of our private schools, who had been teaching the same to her pupils, came to assist us one day, and after the class was over she came up to us and said: "I cannot understand how it is that these children pick up this work so much quicker than mine of ten and eleven, and they are the children of educated parents."

If we refer to almost the beginning of my paper I think we shall find the clue. The poorer children are descended from several generations of manual workers, and *our* grandparents forgot almost altogether that they possessed a pair of hands. Let us learn our lesson, and from the beginning of a child's life train it to use its hands well.

There are two points that must be remembered if we wish to make our system of art teaching in the nursery successful. The *first* is: always keep the children interested.

*Secondly*, let us realize that drawing is not only learnt by means of a pencil and a piece of paper. The first principle of teaching drawing or any other subject is to arouse the intelligence — to make the pupil feel that the subject in hand is one of the most interesting things in the world, which every healthy young mind finds full of interest; that drawing is not an abstract study which they must plod at a certain length of time, however dull it may be, in order to become accomplished men and women, but a study full of deep meanings and vitality, affecting everything they see in the course of the day.

Almost all children show a desire to draw; but, curiously enough, when they begin to be *taught* to draw this desire generally leaves them.

Take the case of children brought up on freehand copies only, who, strange to say, do not become the Raphaels or Millais their mothers expected; nor, what surprises her still more, do they even wish to become artists. Do not let the poor little fingers get stiff in trying to turn the curves which convey no meaning to their tired eyes, and still more wearied brain, worn out with the attempts to make this side exactly



match that side. If they pass through this ordeal with no dislike to art, it is solely because they do not connect the two kinds of drawing, the curves and cubes of their drawing books having no relation to their much more loved representation of a boat in full sail on a stormy sea, or a house with mother walking in the garden holding up a parasol. Dry passages in the study of drawing need be very few, almost all can be made interesting.

A friend was lately helping a little boy to draw a cup and saucer, and explained to him the changes that took place as the position of the cup was changed. He listened with great interest, and a few days afterwards burst into the room in a state of high glee, to describe the wonderful changes he had seen take place in the shape of the wheels of a railway engine. "At first it was a long way off, and was like this," he said, taking up a piece of charcoal and drawing a straight line; "then it was like this," drawing an oval, "and then when it came into the station it was quite round." He was over six years old and found the elements of perspective positively exciting.

How many parents could draw a tea-cup if placed before them? and yet we expect mites of six and seven to do this, and then wonder why they are not fonder of drawing. A friend remarked recently, "I do not know how it is, but my children used to be so fond of drawing, and now they all dislike it." When enquiries were made as to the method used in teaching, the answer was, "Oh, of course they have gone and are still going through the freehand course." "Do they ever draw from objects or from Nature?" "Oh dear no," was the reply, "the teacher will not allow *vagaries*, as she calls them."

I own that many of the freehand copies are taken from Greek ornament, which is above criticism, but the point and interest of this ornament lay in the play of light and shadow over the modelled surface, and when the light and shadow and all the little irregularities and variations which characterise hand work are removed, the whole life and meaning of the original are taken away. Is it wise also for a child to draw ornament? An untrained mind does not understand abstract form, and a child will cease to take interest in a study she cannot connect with her own life.

Give your child a large sheet of paper and a good pencil, or piece of charcoal if you are going to superintend. Boys have a way of lying over their work when left alone, and charcoal will soil not only the paper but their clothes. It is also good for a child to get accustomed to many mediums, to disabuse him of the idea that too much depends on the means. Ask him to draw for you his cart and horse, which you place about two and a half yards away from him, or his stable with the cart in it, or his boat with the sail up, or the big stuffed Jumbo. Let the girls draw their dolls and shops and dolls' furniture. Their delight, when they find that they really can produce a drawing that resembles their pet possessions, will show you what I mean by interesting them.

All children like colours and love the paint box. Let them produce the pure bright colour of Nature, such as every eye that is unsophisticated loves. No child likes low tones or washed-out colours; they are for the world-worn, too weary to bear the glory of true colour. The sense of colour seems to be forsaking us. Our cities are gray and melancholy from the absence of beautiful colour in buildings and dress; our skies, from the smoke of our cities; our pictures are sad in tone, and all brightness is considered *bad taste*.

Let us try to save the coming generation from the blight that has fallen upon ourselves, and make the children love purity of colour.

Let them therefore paint their own drawings and if they really get the yellow of the cart or the piebald of the pony, their delight is boundless, and these children will grow up with a sense of form and colour—if the eye is dimmed in youth the mischief can never be quite undone—which will permeate their lives, for Nature has many secrets to reveal to the *instructed* eye.

We must now turn to our *second* point: that drawing is not to be only learned by means of paper and pencil and brush; the chief value of drawing is that it trains the eye to see things as they are, and this training can be given in many ways.

Many years ago, a baby of eighteen months found a loose large nail in a hole in the wall, about his own height. He spent half an hour taking it out, and at first very uncertainly finding the hole and putting it in again. His mother watched him,



recognising the fact that the boy was having an extremely good drawing lesson, he was learning firmness of the hand, and that the brain must govern and the hand obey. The next day he tried again, but found it much easier, and in a day or two he never failed to at once insert the nail in its hole. He is now a big boy and shows great artistic promise and skill.

When a child is old enough, it is intense happiness to him to sit by his mother's side and with a pair of scissors cut out birds, horses, boys and girls; and often the mother is surprised at the agility and cleverness of her child, who has had an excellent lesson in imagination and form without knowing it. All children like to play with paste or dough and mould nests, etc. A little clay, which can be obtained for a very small sum, will amuse children through many winter afternoons, and wet days, and all the time they are training their eyes and hands. They are learning drawing in clay, and I believe that in future ages our descendants will wonder why we did not teach modelling in clay to every child, and that any kind of art education could have existed without it. For their first lesson the little boys in our National School each one made a basket and filled it with eggs. In the second lesson they copied a loaf, a breadboard and a knife. The third lesson they each made a flower-pot and stand, into which they put soil and sowed some cress, which caused great excitement and delight to the young artists as it came up in a pot of their own making.

It is wonderful how clay-modelling has come to the front in educational methods and art training the last two years.

There are a few rules which might be a guide to some who are anxious to introduce it into their nurseries. I would first of all recommend modelling paste—for nursery use. It is perfectly clean and does not soil hands, faces, or pinafores as the clay does, therefore the nurse takes more kindly to the new occupation, which is a decided gain. Let the serious lesson occupy half an hour twice a week, but let the little ones have paste to model as they like in between. For a lesson take a small object, such as an apple, pear, nut, banana, potato, stone from the road, doll's shoe, date, raisin. Do not take clusters, such as grapes; they fall off and break, and disappoint the artists.

We now come to our last point: art in lesson-books. I wonder if the time will come when some of our well-trained artists, instead of increasing the numbers in an already overcrowded profession, will turn their attention to the lesson-books of the younger generation, and produce pictures for them that will at the same time benefit the æsthetic sense, and increase the love of the student for, say, geography and history? A child now looks at a map, and imagines a river to be a fine black wire running very crookedly through a pink or blue country. If an artist would bring out a series of our English rivers, for instance, the little students would grasp the idea that trees grow by the rivers, and churches rise up near her banks, and villages nestle by their sides.

In history also there is a great field open to the artist. At present, if you wish to show a child a picture of chain armour, for instance, you are directed to page 33, and there you find a lifeless representation of a piece of armour stretched on cross-bars one spike standing up where the head should be, looking more like our modern scarecrow than anything else. If, instead of this soulless caricature, you could show a sketch of a battle where the armour could be shown in every conceivable position, the pupil would gain not only a knowledge of the shape of the armour, but of its just use in service on the field of battle. Cassell's *Illustrated History of England* is one of the best I know for children.

Would that an artist would design friezes for our nurseries and school-room walls about three feet wide and on some material that could be easily taken down and put up again, on which might be drawn, in bold outline, scenes from English and foreign history. One great educationalist has had this idea for several years, but has never yet met the artist who would carry it out.

Do not let us imagine that all our children after this art training will become great and celebrated artists in the future, but of this we may be certain, that those children who are well-trained in the nursery will, as they grow older, see more of beauty in this beautiful world than will those less fortunate ones whose early art training is left to take care of itself.

In conclusion, I beg to leave with you the child's own appeal to us all —

“Give it to me, and I will make more of it for myself.”